

# HIGH SOCIETY JEWELS

VIVIENNE BECKER  
JEWELLERY EDITOR, HARPERS & QUEEN

WHEN ELSA MAXWELL, SOCIETY hostess, put together her list of the twelve most perfect dinner party guests, the Duke of Verdura, the aristocratic and witty Sicilian-born jeweller, was very near the top. In the 1940s and '50s, that last great age of conspicuous wealth and bejewelled glamour, the master jewellers themselves became the glittering gems of high society and their creations, exclusive, whimsical and precious, became the sought-after badges of the world's most fabulous women.

From the 1930s through the 1950s and into the '60s, fine jewels chosen and worn with flair and courage were an essential part of any high society lifestyle. It was a world of constant travel from Paris to Palm Beach, from New York to London, a world of nightclubs, charity balls, openings, *The Season*, *The Columns*. In 1966, after Truman Capote's famous *Black and White* ball, where according to the magazine *Mademoiselle*, the guest book read like 'an international list for the Guillotine', socialite Gloria Guinness had to spend two days in bed, with neck pain brought on by two monumental necklaces, one of diamonds and one of rubies that had swathed her swanlike neck.

For these women who had everything jewels were the ultimate expressions of wealth, luxury and individuality. Provocative fantasy jewels conceived by designers such as Schlumberger, Verdura or Jeanne Toussaint of Cartier brought together the worlds of high fashion and fine jewels, while magnificent, rare gemstones, those miracles of nature, sought out by the world's adventurer-gem-merchants, stood for everlasting beauty and immortality; the things money could never buy.

The story begins in Paris in the 1930s, when two young, artistic men, the Duke of Verdura, and Jean Schlumberger found themselves in a city pulsating with new and original talent, with the brilliance of wild artistry, with luxury, freedom and fantasy. Paris was obsessed with art and design, with novelty, hedonism and freedom of expression. It was the Paris of Cocteau, Berard and Misia Sert, of jazz and Josephine Baker, of Dali and Picasso, and of Cartier and The Ritz.

Both Verdura and Schlumberger became key figures in

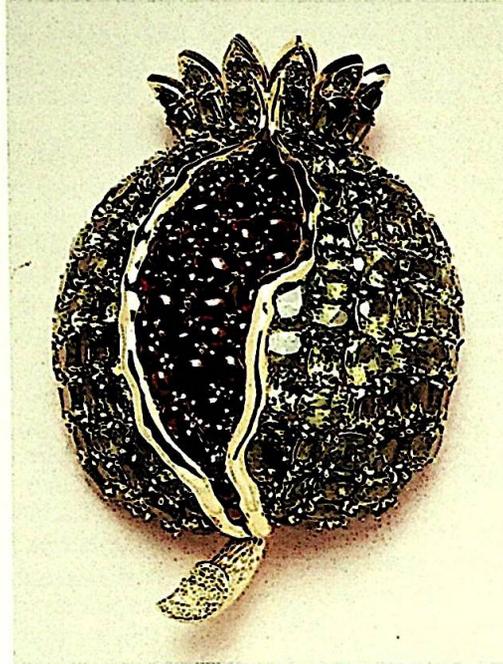


Figure 1. Exotic pomegranate brooch by Verdura, set with peridots, rubies and yellow diamonds. Courtesy of Verdura.

elite, artistic Parisian social circles. Both were closely involved with fashion through the legendary couturiers, Verdura with Chanel and Schlumberger with Schiaparelli, at a time when these giants of 20th century style were instigating an entirely new approach to jewels. Jewellery was now a vital fashion accessory; design and fantasy became more important than intrinsic value. It is significant that neither Verdura nor Schlumberger, both of whom went on to become leaders of 20th century jewellery design, had any professional training in the jewellery trade; instead they served their apprenticeship in Paris in this atmosphere of crazy creativity, high fashion and high society.

Schlumberger arrived in Paris some time in the late 1920s, from his birthplace in Mulhouse, Alsace. Born in 1907, the son of a wealthy well-respected textile manufacturer,

he grew to be an imaginative, artistic child. Strong family tradition stopped him pursuing any training in art or design but after an unsuccessful attempt at banking, Schlumberger moved to Paris and found himself easily and happily immersed in the dazzling world of Paris society. As an antidote to the obsession with novelty, Paris was also swept with a craze for Victoriana, and Schlumberger, haunting the flea markets, picked up gilt cherubs and serpents, Venetian glass beads, porcelain flowers from old chandeliers. He turned them into fantasy jewels which he gave to his friends. Before long he was flooded with requests for these whimsical accessories, so much so that he gave up a full time job, took over an atelier from Picasso and expanded his range of costume jewels, paraded proudly in the highest echelons of society, by women such as The Hon. Mrs Reginald 'Daisy' Fellowes, Mrs Harrison Williams, Princess Jean-Louis 'Baba' Faucigny-Lucinge. When the eagle-eyed Elsa Schiaparelli spotted a stunning pair of golden flying fish earrings worn by Marina, Duchess of Kent in 1937, she immediately commissioned Schlumberger to make a series of buttons and other bizarre baubles which caused a sensation in Paris and then all around the world. These were true fantasy jewels that broke all the rules of jewel wearing and turned tradition on its head. The scintillating association of Schlumberger and Schiaparelli



Figure 2. A modern version of the Maltese Cross bangles, in wood set with gold, diamonds, coral and turquoise. Courtesy of Verdura.

came up with jewels formed as sea creatures, luminous fish, roller skates, ostriches laden with coloured glass balloons, acrobats, specimen-type insects.

While Schlumberger was making his name with Schiaparelli, Verdura was working for her rival, Coco Chanel. Having blown the last of his inheritance on a fancy dress ball in his ancestral palazzo in Palermo, he had come to Paris on the advice of Linda and Cole Porter, whom he met in Venice during a misspent but glorious youth.

The son of a delightfully eccentric Sicilian family, he grew up between the family Palazzo in Palermo, a villa just outside the city and a country estate, all of which provided him with a rich portfolio of themes and inspirations for his future career. Lush tropical gardens, sun-drenched orange groves, a little lake with a miniature island, strange animals from baboons to a mongoose, dark libraries lined with antique books, native Italian monuments and Renaissance art, all fired his imagination.

When his father died in 1919 he took his inheritance and travelled through Europe, pursuing high society in Cannes, Paris, Venice. It was the perfect time to be young, independent and carefree. At a party in Venice in 1926 he met Linda and Cole Porter and began a friendship that was to last over 40 years and have a powerful influence on his career.

Once in Paris, he started work as a textile designer for Chanel, but sharing her interest in Renaissance goldwork and precious antique trinkets, he began to redesign her personal jewels. Most of her collection had been given to her

by her extravagant lovers, the Duke of Westminster and the Russian Grand Duke Dmitri. Verdura became Chanel's head of jewellery design for the next several years, during which time he created her celebrated signature Maltese Cross bangles, which she wore all the time, one on each wrist. They were inspired by a very precious Maltese Cross given to her by the Grand Duke. However, contrary to general belief, as he explained himself in a taped interview later in his life, Verdura never designed costume jewellery for Chanel; he worked only in precious or semi-precious materials.

Verdura also became a close friend of Chanel, and often accompanied her to parties or costume balls or acted as her eyes and ears. Schlumberger too became a personality on both sides of the Atlantic. In New York his 'junk' jewellery was all the rage, and besides, this young, talented, handsome and charming Frenchman took up a privileged position in society. 'Mademoiselle' called him 'darkly fascinating' and went on to say that 'M. Schlumberger is as much the rage socially as are his plastic jewellery designs for Elsa's creations and his re-settings of old family jewels for the Duchess of Westminster and others of the haut monde... Smart hostesses vie for him at their dinner parties, languishing debutantes for a glance at his liquid brown eyes'.

All this publicity apparently spoiled his friendship with the volatile Schiaparelli and when the bubble of high living burst in 1939 with the outbreak of war, Schlumberger joined the army and eventually settled in New York. Around 1934, Verdura meanwhile had decided with his friend Baron Nicolas de Gunzburg to move to America. Nicky de Gunzburg was to become fashion editor at *Harpers Bazaar*

and editor-in-chief of *Town and Country* and always remained a great support to Verdura. Having toured the States from Palm Beach to Palm Springs, armed with a list of glossy names, Verdura found a job designing jewels for Paul Flato in New York and then ran Flato's Los Angeles operation, making the acquaintance of the film star community, from which he drew many future clients. In 1939 Verdura set up his own business in New York with the backing of Cole Porter, and from the opening of his discreet Fifth Avenue offices, the rich and famous, glamorous and glorious beat a path to his door to buy his exclusive jewels. Verdura became the high society jeweller of his day. He knew everyone and heard all the latest gossip; he was witty, charming and aristocratic. He also understood exactly what women wanted in their jewellery, what excited them, what looked good. He understood their need for exclusivity, for personal service and their desire to thrill and impress their peers. Fashion photographer Horst recalled of Verdura and the Duchess of Windsor: 'He transformed her. She bought from other jewellers but he alone understood how to make her a duchess.'

Meanwhile, Cartier, nestling amongst the traditional jewellers of the rue de la Paix and the Place Vendôme was enjoying its glorious days in the sun, at the zenith of its creativity, attracting rich, royal and famous clients, princes and potentates, from all around the world. The name of Cartier became synonymous with luxury, it was Cartier that made the Twenties roar and the Cocktail age fizz. Louis Cartier, the artistic genius, came up with exciting innovations in jewels and watches, inspired by art, culture and the world around him, while his brother Pierre Cartier scoured the globe searching out the rarest and most precious gems and pearls as playthings for the mega-rich.

In 1933, the wedding of the year took place in Paris, between the Woolworth heiress and jewel-collector extraordinaire Barbara Hutton and Prince Mdivani. High society jewels were out in force, with Daisy Fellowes wearing lavish Indian inspired cuffs. Unconventional as ever, the bride had chosen as her engagement ring from Cartier a single black pearl of 105 grains. An inveterate traveller, Barbara Hutton had recently returned from Bali where she fell in love with the traditional Balinese wooden headdresses. For her bridal outfit she commissioned Louis Cartier to make a Balinese wedding tiara of tortoiseshell with a diamond pattern copied from the blossoms woven into her wedding veil. The bride's father had done his shopping at Cartier too; his gift to his daughter on her wedding was a staggering pearl necklace once worn by Marie Antoinette.

At the end of the 1930s, just before he left for war, Schlumberger had begun to turn his attention to more precious jewels and materials. As a natural progression of his work, several of the smart ladies in his circle began asking him to make fantasy jewels using precious materials. Daisy Fellowes and Madame Pleydell-Bouverie started by giving him gemstones to set or reset. Schlumberger enjoyed the challenge and loved the noble qualities of fine materials, but he never admired jewels that were only of interest for their value. As he commented later: 'You might as well pin a cheque to your lapel'. Verdura, likewise, was known to despise huge solitaire diamonds, calling them 'swimming pools'. It was this attitude towards jewellery that drew the



Figure 3. The famous clamshell brooch set with diamonds and emeralds, by Verdura. Courtesy of Verdura.

exquisite ladies of fashion to the high society jewellers.

After the war Schlumberger set up his own fine jewellery business with a friend, Nicolas Bongard, who looked after the business matters leaving Schlumberger free to design. Virtually their first customer was the arbiter of style and taste, Diana Vreeland, who became a close friend and an ardent admirer of 'Johnny' as she called him and also of Verdura. She supported them both in the early days of their careers. She had met Johnny when he was making buttons for Schiaparelli in Paris. Diana Vreeland commissioned Schlumberger to make her 'dream' jewel, a trophy of symbols of gallantry, inspired by the coats of arms she had seen on buildings in her favourite town of Nancy in France. The result was a spectacular brooch called 'Trophée', a suit of armour crossed with a shield and pierced with a bow and arrows and a spear, laden with motifs of chivalry. The scaly chainmail of the armour was set with diamonds, against a background of amethysts spiked with rubies and backed with deep blue enamel.

Another early customer at Schlumberger was Mrs De Witt Wallace of the Reader's Digest publishing empire. In 1941, when a winged horse was the magazine's trademark, Schlumberger designed a fantastic Pegasus brooch for her – engraved emeralds, baguette amethysts, rubies and diamonds – all glowing with Renaissance splendour. In 1956 Walter Hoving, the new chairman of Tiffany & Company, enticed Schlumberger and Bongard to set up their own department in the Fifth Avenue store. From this time, Schlumberger embarked on his most fabulous production of jewels, using

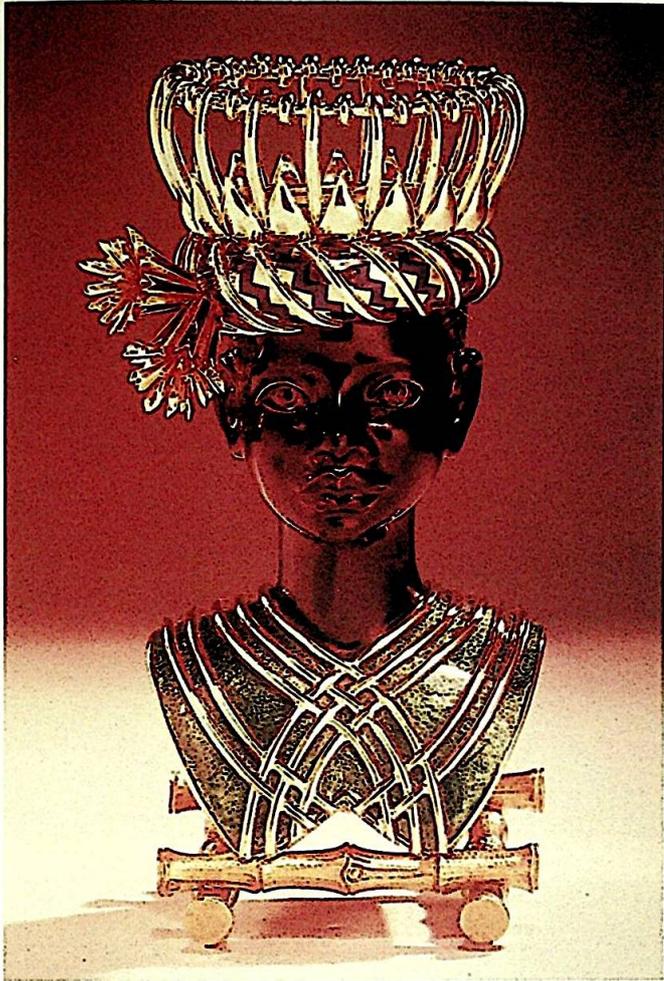


Figure 4. Blackamoor clip by Schlumberger, 1960, in gold, enamel, black lacquer and sapphires. Photograph Private collection.

the huge supply of magnificent and unusual stones put at his disposal from the Tiffany resources. The luxurious and exclusive Schlumberger department drew a vast array of discerning clients from Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon to Elizabeth Taylor and Jackie Kennedy.

What was it about the jewels themselves that made them so desirable to this elite clientele of jewellery addicts? Schlumberger's and Verdura's designs were totally in tune with the new spirit of the post-War years of the '40s and '50s. To women accustomed to diamonds and to the rôle of conventional gem-set jewels, the arrival of an exciting, entirely new wave of fine jewellery design was a welcome change. After the flat, stylised ornaments of the 1920s and '30s, and the monochromatic diamond and platinum jewels, the new jewels were voluptuous, three dimensional, colourful and figurative. Layered with cultural and historical references, they told magical tales of baroque fantasies, of mythical creatures, the wild richness of nature, the splendour of the Renaissance and the exoticism of the East. These jewels spoke volumes about a woman's personal style, her taste, her individuality, in a way that diamonds alone could no longer do. Above all society women were thrilled with the utter luxury of a whimsical fantasy jewel supremely executed with a certain elegant nonchalance in unexpectedly

precious materials. As Dali noted in his diary, when he collaborated with Verdura on a series of painted jewels, 'Uselessness is the first condition of luxury'.

Yellow gold burst back into fashion in the late 1930s, ending the reign of the cool and slender platinum settings. The Jet Set was travelling constantly as improved travel and communications opened up new horizons. The ladies of fashion from Diana Vreeland to Barbara Hutton had been totally seduced by the colour and exoticism of India and Indian ornaments with their extensive use of gold settings for sumptuous gems. Buttery yellow gold, traditionally a symbol of wealth, of the sun and of power was wrought by the new jewellers into sculptural opulence. There were ribbon bows, velvety soft and curvaceous, intricate Renaissance style knot work turned into rope bracelets and fringe necklaces, luscious textured feathers, quirky animals, gleaming rays of sun.

Colour was a vital ingredient in the style of the 1940s, and the new brilliant enamels revived by these two jewellers flattered and enhanced the glory of gold. Both worked with baked layered enamels with a special silky sheen. Diana Vreeland, who revelled in colour, adored Schlumberger's enamels which she described as 'Clear, transparent sun yellows. Wonderful lacquer reds. Acid spring greens. The clear blue of the Southern sky'. Schlumberger's enamelled bangles of the 1960s, on which the clear, rich colour was fixed with studs of gold, were worn and popularised by Jackie Kennedy, and have become 20th century classics. The vibrant enamels intensified the courageous colour combinations created by unprecedented mixtures of gemstones, sapphires with emeralds, amethysts with aquamarines, spinels with turquoises.

Verdura drew on the eccentric and varied world of his childhood, on the forms of the Renaissance that reverberated through his Italian upbringing. He used 18th century splendour touched with romantic, fairytale chivalry and brilliantly blended elegance and whimsy. Schlumberger was inspired by his travels, by his home in Guadeloupe, by illustrated manuscripts, 19th century books on cookery or medicinal herbs, by textiles, carpets and lace. His designs were perhaps more fantastic, more supernatural, Verdura's more graphic and stylised, yet all were touched in some way with a certain magic. Both Verdura and Schlumberger played with nature in a way that had never been done before. Verdura used feathers, wings, fern fronds, leaves, animals whose bodies were baroque pearls. Perhaps most famous of all are his shell jewels, in which he embellished real shells with gold and gems. The Duchess of Windsor was the first to champion this innovation and the fashion spread like wildfire in the 1950s. He gathered shells and pebbles from the beach or bought them at the American Museum of Natural History. It was a fashion that caught public imagination and was much copied from David Webb to Kenneth Jay Lane.

Schlumberger too depicted shells in precious and semi-precious stones, and his designs exploded with movement and colour. The sea was particularly important to Schlumberger with its mysterious currents and curious creatures and plants. Early in his career in 1939 he had produced a lighter in the form of a golden fish – his first object in precious materials – which became the status symbol accessory amongst fashion followers of the day. This famous fish was



Figure 5. (l. to r.) Red banana earclips, red alternating links bracelet, blue croissillons bracelet and blue banana earclips by Schlumberger in gold with transparent Paillone enamel. Courtesy of Tiffany & Co.

later joined by dolphins – Elizabeth Taylor owned a dolphin jewel – jellyfish, starfish, and mysterious serpentine sea creatures.

One of the most successful of the baroque, romantic tales interpreted in jewels was the exotic Blackamoor. Popular in the 18th century, the motif was once again all the rage in the mid 1930s, worn in groups of three or four or more by the powerful icons of fashion and beauty. Both Verdura and Schlumberger designed lavish blackamoor jewels, as did Cartier. The Princesse 'Baba' Faucigny-Lucinge was the first to wear Cartier's jewelled blackamoors, while her close friend Diana Vreeland wore them in rows, mixing real and fake. At the time she thought that people couldn't tell the difference between Cartier's blackamoors and copies sold at Saks for \$30. 'I wore blackamoors the way Peggy Hopkins Joyce wore diamonds,' she said.

High society jewels were always cleverly geared to prevailing fashions. In the 1930s, conversation piece brooches were worn on the lapels of smart, sharp, Schiaparelli-style suits, and a little later occupied the space created by the new wide-shouldered jackets and dresses. Still later in the 1950s, important necklaces, fringes of jewelled knots or wild gardens of flowers and leaves, or drapes of pebble-like gems, wrapped with diamonds, looked perfect with the bare-shouldered full-skirted evening gowns in the Charles James mode. When hair was swept off the face – the style perfected by the Duchess of Windsor – Verdura made amusing and eye catching earrings, caged Mabé pearls, in black and white, or



Figure 6. Melon box in gold with peridots, cabochon turquoises and emeralds. Courtesy of Tiffany & Co.

sparkling drops of pink, chartreuse or sherry coloured stones hung from bows or golden laurel wreaths.

Both Verdura and Schlumberger, and Cartier of course, received many special commissions for personalised jewels and objects, the most exclusive of all. From the earliest days of his career, Verdura's friend Linda Porter started a first-night ritual of giving her husband a cigarette case designed by Fulco, each case in some way capturing the theme of the musical. In all Verdura designed more than 20 of them. For *Red Hot and Blue*, in 1936, the case was striped with rubies, diamonds and sapphires, while *Panama Hattie* in 1940 was celebrated with a gold case woven like fine straw.

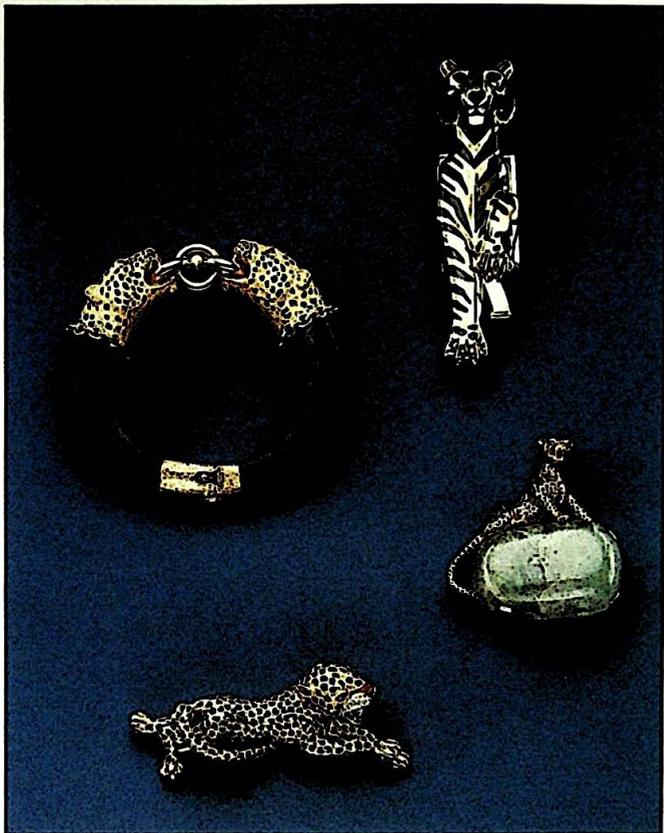


Figure 7. Group of Big Cat jewels by Cartier, from the collection of the Duchess of Windsor. Photograph courtesy of Sotheby's.

The Whitneys, who circulated in the stratosphere of High Society, were good friends of Verdura. When John Hay Whitney was appointed Ambassador to the United Kingdom in the 1950s, his wife Betsy, who was to be presented at Court, commissioned a tiara from Verdura. Verdura was not interested in competing with the traditional diamond tiara; instead he devised a wittily appropriate version, based on an American Indian headdress, with gold feathers rising from a narrow circlet and set with diamonds.

In London, the Whitneys, famed for their lavish entertaining, spent a great deal of time in the company of H.M. Queen Elizabeth and H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh. On one occasion, the gentlemen embarked on a conversation on the lost art of enamelling and Jock Whitney took off his enamel tie pin by Verdura and gave it to Prince Philip to examine. When the Prince admired the work, Jock Whitney made it a gift to his Royal host. With a letter of thanks to the Whitneys, Prince Philip sent by return his own tie pin, a safety pin.

Betsy Whitney's sister was the beautiful and immaculately dressed Babe Paley, a keen jewellery buyer and a devotee of both Verdura and Schlumberger as well as a regular visitor to Van Cleef & Arpels. Amongst the vast numbers of jewels left to friends in her will, there were such highly prized trinkets as a Verdura blackamoor clip and a Schlumberger starfish brooch. It was for Babe Paley that Verdura created a suite of pink topaz jewels, starting a huge new trend for this neglected semi-precious stone.

The Maltese Cross from his Chanel days remained a popular motif in Verdura's repertoire. In 1943 he designed a brooch for Clare Booth Luce, based on a large diamond set cross set against rays of gold and baguette diamonds, giving the effect of an order or decoration, a prophetic design since Mrs Luce went on to receive numerous honours.

Amongst his star-studded clientele Schlumberger counted Jackie Kennedy and Mrs Paul Mellon, perhaps his most devoted fan. She built a sumptuous collection of jewels and fantasy objects, many of them now housed in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia. For the Mellons he transformed a rare sapphire acquired by his partner, Bongard, from the widow of a gem collector, into a huge sunflower, eight inches tall, with a thick fringe of coloured gold petals. It was planted in a simple clay flowerpot, the kind Mrs Mellon used in the greenhouses on her Virginia estate, covered in a gold trelliswork and filled with earth of black garnets. In a similar spirit he made enamelled and jewelled palm trees, mermaid candleholders, extraordinary clocks and a spectacular series of boxes shaped like a cucumber, a melon (appropriately), a mushroom.

Amongst the most influential fashion leaders of the period was the beautiful Daisy Fellowes, the Singer sewing machine heiress, famed for her style, her wealth, her clothes and her jewels. She shared with the Duchess of Windsor the title of world's best-dressed woman and entertained the Windsors regularly on her yacht. Her father was a French-Danish Duke and her mother an American socialite, (née Singer). She had previously been married to Prince Jean de Broglie and became one of the great hostesses of Parisian *haut monde* in the 1930s. Hers was an original taste: she liked everything exotic and off-beat and wore her flamboyant jewels with amazing panache. Daisy Fellowes sometimes bought rare and unusual diamonds at Cartier but she is best known for her love of luxurious but innovative designs. In the 1930s, like so many of her set, she travelled to India and became completely besotted with all things Indian: with its kaleidoscope of vivid colours, the richness of its traditional costume and ornaments, the lusciousness of the great Indian carved gems, the magic and mystery of the Maharajahs and their sumptuous way with jewels. In 1936 she commissioned a set of Indian inspired 'fruit salad' jewels from Cartier: a heavy, fringed necklace clustered with small carved sapphires, rubies, emeralds all sprinkled with diamond motifs to link this theme to the prevailing mood of modernism and a pair of carved emerald and diamond drop earrings.

The same elements of magical fantasy, exciting materials and colour schemes tempted Daisy Fellowes to join the elite international group of women, including the Duchess of Windsor, Barbara Hutton and the Princess Aga Khan, who wore Cartier's fabulous Big Cat jewels. These were the creation of Jeanne Toussaint, Cartier's stylish head of Haute Joaillerie. Daisy Fellowes commissioned a panther brooch of sapphires and diamonds, unusually modelled on the Order of the Golden Fleece. Instead of the hanging fleece Toussaint used a drooping panther enhanced with an ornamental band of baguette diamonds. Still later in the 1960s, Mrs Fellowes fell in love with Toussaint's theme of the mystical, mythical chimaera and she ordered a bangle of carved coral set with coloured gems and diamonds.

The world's richest and most newsworthy heiress, Barbara



Hutton, was addicted both to jewels and husbands. She adored wildly luxurious and colourful figurative fantasies and also had a penchant for fabulously expensive and historic emeralds and pearls. She too had fallen for Indian jewels especially as the country had often been a refuge for her in times of personal crisis. From Jeanne Toussaint's menagerie of jewelled wild animals, Barbara Hutton chose the tigers, brilliantly executed in canary yellow diamonds and onyx stripes, also based on the Golden Fleece theme. She wore a tiger bracelet, a brooch and an evening bag with an enamelled tiger clasp.

The big cat jewels, which remained popular with the feline stars of society well into the 1960s, expressed the

Figure 8. The Indian-inspired 'fruit salad' coloured gemstone and diamond necklace made by Cartier for Daisy Fellowes in 1936 and sold at Sotheby's Geneva in 1991.

sensual, exciting, even predatory aspects of 20th century femininity. Verdura's and Schlumberger's jewelled fantasies and Cartier's charismatic creations have become the most powerful symbols of a lost lifestyle, and of the century's most fabulous and stylish women, who were in turn the embodiments of the world's aspirations and dreams. Created as toys and trinkets for the super-rich, these high society jewels have also given us some of the most original and enduring examples of 20th century jewellery design.